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Remarriage, Unmarried Cohabitation, Living Apart Together: Partner Relationships Following Bereavement or Divorce

*Substantial proportions of people enter into new partner relationships after bereavement or divorce. Nowadays in Europe, unmarried cohabitation and living-apart-together relationships are frequently opted for at repartnering. Drawing on the Netherlands' Living Arrangements and Social Networks survey of men and women aged 55 to 89 years (*N = *4,494), this article explicates the determinants that lead widowed or divorced people to enter into old and new types of partner relationships. Cox proportional hazard regression analyses revealed that age at most recent union dissolution, the number of partner dissolutions, working during and after the most recent union dissolution, and other demographic variables are important in weighing the pros and cons of different types of living arrangements.*

For those still in first marriage, the increase in life expectancy results in a longer duration of the partner bond through aging together. A growing percentage of divorced adults (Wu & Penning, 1997) face the possibility of long periods of living alone. Some divorced and widowed people remarry, but unmarried cohabitation, and so-called living-apart-together relationships—where partners maintain separate households and finances and share living quarters on an intermittent or temporary basis—are becoming more common in Northern and Western Europe (Bumpass, Sweet, & Martin, 1990; Chevan, 1996; Davidson, 2002; de Jong Gierveld & Peeters, 2003; Karllson & Borell, 2002; Stevens, 2002; Waite, 1995; Wu & Balakrishnan, 1994).

Elderly people's strategies to maintain an optimal level of social well-being are addressed in socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1992). In this theory, the primacy of social goals is expected to be related to time constraints. When time is perceived to be limited, as is the case for many older adults, emotional goals assume primacy over the acquisition of knowledge. Empirical research has shown that older adults prefer familiar social relationships, and "older couples regulate emotion in a way that should help preserve what is a very important late-life relationship—marriage" (Carstensen, 1995, p. 155). The theory emphasizes preserving familiar close relationships (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999). Until now, however, the formation of new emotionally close relationships among older adults has not been widely examined within the theory (Lang, 2001). In this article, I investigate the incidence of repartnering and the determinants

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that lead adults to enter into a new partner relationship. In doing so, I differentiate between those who remarry, start a consensual union, or begin a living-apart-together relationship.

Background

New Partner Relationships in Later Life: Goals, Opportunities, and Restrictions

Living alone in later life after widowhood or divorce increases the risks of loneliness, but living with a partner might be helpful in increasing well-being (de Jong Gierveld, 1998; van Baarsen & Broese van Groenou, 2001). Men in particular appear to adapt less easily to the loss of their partners (Lee, Willets, & Seccombe, 1998), and benefit more than women from partner relationships (Antonucci, 1994; Bograd & Spilka, 1996; Cooney & Dunne, 2001). Finding a new partner may be an attractive option for older adults, especially men (Dykstra, 1990) who feel deprived of the taken-for-granted attentive activities that were carried out for them by their former wives (Mason, 1996). Others, particularly widows, might hesitate to give up the freedom and independence they enjoyed after coming to terms with bereavement (Lopata, 1996; Pyke, 1994). In opting for either living alone or sharing a household with a new partner, one has to weigh the pros and cons of both options. Sharing a household—that is to say, living as a couple—may provide people with personal care, reciprocal attention and support, companionship, and the division of household tasks. Possible negative aspects include frustrations when one partner invests less time, money, and effort in the cooperative undertaking than the other, and less than had been presumed in the informal contract between the partners. Further, when people repartner, they may risk losing some contact with their children and friends, particularly if the repartnering involves leaving the family home, moving, and merging households.

In weighing the options, some may conclude that remarriage requires too great a sacrifice. Instead, some opt for a consensual union because it is characterized by less strict rules, and others prefer to refrain from sharing a residence and to continue living alone. Finally, some older men and women opt to start a partner relationship without living together. These men and women, realizing a living-apart-together relationship, continue to live in a one-person household, intermittently (e.g., several days a week or on weekends) sharing a household with their new partners (Davidson, 2002; de Jong Gierveld, 2002; Stevens, 2002).

Note that living arrangements such as consensual unions and living-apart-together may have become a realistic option only in the late second half of the 20th century. Improved economic circumstances make it possible for more people to live on their own. Moreover, sociocultural changes in the second half of the 20th century led people to move away from traditional patterns of behavior, resulting in a reduction in behavioral conformation (Inglehart, 1997; van de Kaa, 1987). The pace of accepting new attitudes and behavioral patterns differs significantly among countries and regions (Mellens, 1999), but began to affect the broader audience in Western Europe after around 1970. I hypothesize, then, that the incidence of consensual unions and of living-apart-together relationships began in the last decades of the 20th century.

The demographic imbalance in the sex ratio makes it easier for men at advanced ages to find a new partner, whereas for women, the pool of suitable men becomes smaller. This discrepancy is intensified because elderly men tend to prefer women who are younger than they are (Morgan & Kunkel, 1998). Therefore, age at dissolution of the former partner relationship is a strong predictor of repartnering, although women with nonresidential children have a higher probability of repartnering than do younger women with children still at home (Sweeney, 1997). Men in better socioeconomic circumstances have more opportunities for finding a new partner, especially if they are involved in activities where they meet other people, such as labor force participation (Bumpass et al., 1990; Chevan, 1996). For women, the situation is more complex. High socioeconomic status delays remarriage among younger women and hastens it among women who ended the former partner relationship at relatively older ages (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000). I hypothesize that younger, more highly educated individuals, men, and those who are still active in the labor market are overrepresented among those who start a new partner relationship.

By definition, consensual unions are partner relationships that are not tied down by the formalities of marriage or remarriage, but leave people's options open. This is especially so when adults start Living Apart Together. So, both types

of living arrangements are interesting options for those who do not feel bound by traditional values and norms. It is expected that younger birth cohorts will have a higher likelihood of accepting these more individualistic ideas than older cohorts. I hypothesize, then, that men and women who are younger or who have more individualistic values will more frequently opt for consensual unions and living-apart-together relationships.

Drawing upon a life course perspective that emphasizes the continuing influence of earlier experiences on later life (Elder, Liker, & Jaworski, 1984), I consider past features of older adults' biographies to be important for predicting the likelihood of repartnering. This includes, for example, having ever been divorced, having ever been widowed, and time since last dissolution. The absence of a related literature precludes hypothesizing their effects.

METHOD

Sample

Empirical data for this study come from the Living Arrangements and Social Networks survey (Knipscheer, de Jong Gierveld, van Tilburg, & Dykstra, 1995). In 1992, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 4,494 men and women aged 55 to 89 years; the same numbers of men and women were selected for each age category. Names and addresses were obtained from the population registers of 11 municipalities in three different regions of the Netherlands. The overall response rate was 62%, which is comparable to response rates of other community surveys concerning older adults in the Netherlands. The realized sample is fairly representative of the elderly population of the Netherlands, although divorced women were slightly underrepresented (Broese van Groenou, van Tilburg, de Leeuw, & Liefbroer, 1995). From 4,494 respondents, I selected the 1,568 respondents who have experienced (one or more events of) widowhood or divorce. The 1,568 respondents include 325 respondents who had entered into a new partner relationship after their (most recent) divorce or widowhood, and 1,243 divorced or widowed respondents who, at the time of the interviewing, continued to live alone.

In the survey, various details were requested about the start and dissolution of each of the partner relationships. Current partner status was elicited by the questions: (a) Are you currently living with someone (person of the opposite or the same sex) whom you consider to be a partner? In the Netherlands, as in other European countries, the partner relationship in this context is explicitly understood to be an intimate, sexual (or potentially sexual) relationship; and (b) Is there someone with whom you do not share living quarters, but whom you do consider to be a partner? Additionally, respondents were asked about their current marital status, age at the start of first (and later) partnership and age at partnership dissolution(s), calendar year of marriage and of coresidence, and changes in partner status. On the basis of the available information, respondents were categorized as *remarried*, *in a consensual union*, or *involved in a living-apart-together relationship*. Of the 325 repartnered respondents, 177 (55%) had remarried, 69 (21%) cohabited with their partners outside of marriage, and 79 (24%) had entered into living-apart-together relationships. Over half (53%) of the 325 repartnered respondents started the new partner relationship at the age of 50 or older. Of these, 40% had remarried, compared with 28% who cohabited with their new partners outside of marriage, and 32% who had entered into a living-apart-together relationship. Among the repartnered respondents, there was one gay male couple.

Measurements

Educational attainment is used as the measure of socioeconomic resources. In the survey, educational level is expressed as the number of years needed to attain a certain diploma, following the shortest route. Life histories show whether the respondents are still active in the labor force during and after the (most recent) dissolution of the former partner relationship.

The questionnaire included questions that, in Europe, are considered to be indicators of traditional versus individualistic values. Of these, I use membership in a church or other religious community.

RESULTS

I first provide descriptive statistics to illustrate the incidence of remarriage, consensual unions, and Living Apart Together after bereavement or divorce. Next, Cox proportional hazards

regression models are used to estimate the effects of fixed and time-dependent covariates on entry into a new partner relationship. I used separate models for men and women, and for remarrieds, adults in consensual unions, and people Living Apart Together.

A total of 21% of the 1,568 adults in the subsample repartnered. Men repartnered more frequently (41%) than women (10%), as expected. Repartnering differs by cohort: 38% of the respondents born between 1928 and 1937 had a new partner, compared with 28% of those born between 1918 and 1927, and 14% of those born between 1903 and 1917. Choice of living arrangement was linked to historical time: The mean calendar year in which the 177 respondents remarried is 1967, the mean calendar year is 1978 for the 69 respondents who opted for consensual unions, and the mean calendar year is 1984 for the 79 respondents who started Living Apart Together. Table 1 gives the descriptive statistics for the independent variables.

Bivariate analyses (Table 1) indicate that men, younger respondents, divorced persons, those who were younger at last dissolution, the more educated, those who were employed before and after the last dissolution, and nonchurch members had higher rates of repartnering. Women were more likely to be living apart together than to be remarried, and widowed adults were more likely to be living apart together than were divorced older adults. Mean age at the time of (the last) dissolution was higher for those who were living apart together (59 years) than for those who remarried (42 years) or who entered into a consensual union (53 years). Mean age at remarriage was significantly lower (47 years) than age at the start of unmarried cohabitation (58 years) or living-apart-together relationships (64 years).

The results of the Cox proportional hazards regression models for repartnering of men and women are presented in Table 2, and the results of the Cox models for the types of living arrangements after repartnering are presented in Table 3.

Table 2 indicates that the oldest women are significantly less likely to repartner than younger women, and widows are less likely to repartner than divorced women. No such effects were found for men. Age at dissolution was related to repartnering for both women and men: Respondents aged 55 years and over at time of dissolution were less likely to repartner than those who were

TABLE 1. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS (% OR *M*) FOR VARIABLES IN THE ANALYSES OF REPARTNERING ($N = 1{,}568$)

	Remarried $n = 177$	Cohabiting $n = 69$	Living Apart Together $n = 79$	No Partner $n = 1243$
Gender (%)***				
Men	73	70	63	26
Women	27	30	37	74
Birth cohort (%)***				
1903–1917	44	46	41	69
1918–1927	31	29	32	20
1928–1937	25	25	28	11
Partner history (%)***				
Widowed (no divorce)	51	58	67	88
Divorced	49	42	33	12
Age at last dissolution (*M*)***	42	53	59	65
Number of dissolutions (*M*)***	1.1	1.1	1.3	1.1
Age at new relationship (*M*)***	47	58	64	–
Year of new relationship (*M*)***	1967	1978	1984	–
Church membership (%)***				
Protestant	24	22	19	32
Roman Catholic	22	17	23	29
No member	55	61	58	39
Educational level (%)***				
5–9 yrs	49	52	60	75
10–11 yrs	29	28	24	15
12–18 yrs	22	20	16	10
Employed during and after (last) dissolution (%)***	79	61	44	16

ANOVA and χ^2 analyses, respectively, indicate significant differences between subgroups.
***$p < .001$.

TABLE 2. PROPORTIONAL HAZARDS REGRESSION MODELS FOR VARIABLES PREDICTING REPARTNERING AFTER WIDOWHOOD OR DIVORCE FOR WOMEN ($N = 1{,}019$) AND MEN ($N = 549$)

	Women			Men		
Predictor	*B*	*SE B*	e^B	*B*	*SE B*	e^B
Birth cohort						
1903–1917	−1.55***	.36	.21	.01	.21	1.01
1918–1927	−.02	.27	.98	.33	.22	1.38
1928–1937 (ref)						
Divorced	.75†	.27	2.12	−.27	.17	.77
Widowed (never divorced) (ref)						
Age last dissolution						
55 or older	−.94†	.33	.39	−1.03***	.25	.36
Less than 55 (ref)						
Number of dissolutions						
2–6	−.42	.37	.65	−.09	.27	.91
1 (ref)						
Church membership						
Protestant	−.43	.30	.65	.06	.19	1.06
Roman Catholic	−.47†	.28	.62	.21	.20	1.23
No member (ref)						
Educational level						
12–18 yrs	.07	.36	1.07	.44*	.19	1.55
10–11 yrs	.72†	.26	2.05	.28	.18	1.32
5–9 yrs (ref)						
Employed (time dependent)	−.19	.26	.83	.55*	.23	1.73
−2 log likelihood		937.619			2005.671	
χ^2		157.093			109.795	
df		10			10	

†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

younger. There was no effect of number of dissolutions on the likelihood of repartnering. Church membership was related to repartnering: Protestant and Roman Catholic women were less likely to repartner than women who are not church members, although only the coefficient for Roman Catholic women was significant. Men with higher educational levels were more likely to repartner. Women who were neither poorly nor highly educated were significantly more likely to repartner in comparison to their peers. Men who were employed at dissolution were more likely to repartner.

Men are six times as likely as women to begin a new partner relationship. Birth cohort is significant as well: Remarrieds are overrepresented in the younger cohort. Those in the oldest birth cohorts are less likely to begin consensual unions or to Live Apart Together compared with members of younger birth cohorts. The widowed do not differ from the divorced in the type of repartnering. Respondents aged 55 and over at last dissolution are less likely to remarry, but are three times more likely to begin Living Apart Together than those who are younger than 55 years at last dissolution.

Respondents with only one dissolution were twice as likely to remarry, whereas those with two (or more) dissolutions were more likely to Live Apart Together. More educated respondents were more likely to remarry. Those who were neither poorly nor highly educated were more likely to begin consensual unions. The employed were more likely to remarry than those not in the labor market.

DISCUSSION

Sociostructural developments and changing values and norms that characterized the second half of the 20th century in European society were expected to affect demographic attitudes and behavior, leading to more behavioral differentiation. This process is relevant to older as well as younger adults. Remarriage today, even for older adults, is competing with consensual unions and Living Apart Together in new partnerships after widowhood or divorce. In support of my first

TABLE 3. PROPORTIONAL HAZARDS REGRESSION MODELS FOR VARIABLES PREDICTING REMARRIAGE, COHABITING, AND LIVING APART TOGETHER ($N = 1{,}568$)

	Remarried			Cohabiting			Living Apart Together		
Predictor	*B*	*SE B*	e^B	*B*	*SE B*	e^B	*B*	*SE B*	e^B
Men	1.87***	.19	6.48	1.73***	.32	5.63	1.79***	.31	5.99
Women (ref)									
Birth cohort									
1903–1917	.06	.20	1.06	−.95*	.43	.39	−2.29***	.45	.10
1918–1927	.46*	.21	1.58	−.10	.39	.90	−1.00*	.41	.37
1928–1937 (ref)									
Divorced	−.01	.18	.99	.32	.36	1.37	−.18	.36	.83
Widowed (ref)									
Age last dissolution									
55 or older	−2.12***	.28	.12	.08	.43	1.08	1.07*	.44	2.92
Less than 55 (ref)									
Number dissolutions									
2–6	−.68†	.35	.51	−.99	.61	.37	.94**	.33	2.57
1 (ref)									
Church membership									
Protestant	.17	.20	1.18	−.30	.37	.74	−.65	.41	.52
Roman Catholic	.32	.21	1.38	−.17	.37	.85	−.23	.36	.79
No member (ref)									
Educational level									
12–18 yrs	.17*	.20	1.69	.57	.39	1.76	−.12	.44	.89
10–11 yrs	.32†	.19	1.37	.73*	.33	2.07	.34	.34	1.40
5–9 yrs (ref)									
Employed (t. dep)	.55*	.22	1.73	−.01	.39	.99	−.29	.40	.75
−2 log likelihood		1959.691			640.800			605.609	
χ^2		463.754			86.537			104.724	
df		11			11			11	

†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

hypothesis, especially in the 1970s, many repartnering adults opted for a consensual union, and beginning in the 1980s, more and more men and women opted to Live Apart Together. Women in older birth cohorts, especially widows, are less likely to repartner than older men and widowers. A higher age at the time of dissolution influenced the likelihood of repartnering negatively for both men and women. Men with less education were less likely to start a new partnership than were more educated men. Education was also related to repartnering for women. Being employed at the time of dissolution and thus having more opportunity to meet a new partner hastened repartnering for men but not for women. These findings support hypothesis 2 and illustrate the attractiveness of potential male partners with better socioeconomic prospects (Sweeney, 1997). Although data on income before repartnering are not included in the survey, older adults' financial situation in the Netherlands is not comparable to that of older adults in many other countries. All citizens aged 65 and over are eligible for the same basic state pension, which allows people to live independently above the poverty level. Therefore, repartnering is not strongly financially motivated among older adults in the Netherlands.

Remarried adults were younger at dissolution and at repartnering (42 and 47 years, respectively), whereas those Living Apart Together were much older (59 and 64 years, respectively). These effects are evident in the multivariate analysis: Being 55 years and over at dissolution is connected to a lower likelihood of remarriage but to a higher likelihood of Living Apart Together. Adults who have experienced two or more union dissolutions are more likely to Live Apart Together at a relatively more mature age than those who experienced one dissolution only. Older adults may hesitate to begin a new couple household, having faced the problems involved in

more than one breakup. A second possible explanation is based on Carstensen's theory (1992, 1995) that older adults prefer familiar social relationships and try to preserve existing, familiar, close relationships. In living-apart-together relationships, both partners keep their own living quarters, perhaps allowing more visits from children and close friends. This strategy enables them to continue familiar social relationships as well as new partnerships.

I expected but did not find that those with more individualistic values, such as nonchurch members, would more frequently Live Apart Together. Perhaps church membership is a poor indicator of individualistic values. Nor could I investigate the role of health, which was only available at the time of the interview. Future research should consider directly the relationship between personal values, health, and repartnering. Further, our analyses to compare the three options (remarriage, consensual unions, Living Apart Together) were limited: Cox analyses can incorporate time-dependent covariates, but do not allow for analysis of competing risks. This study supports the view of Coleman and colleagues (2000) concerning the advisability of carrying out empirical research among older people that takes into account variations in living arrangements, including nontraditional forms such as Living Apart Together. In fact, these data, from 1992, may underestimate the extent to which flexible living arrangements may have become more common and more socially acceptable for older adults.

NOTE

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